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University students' perceptions of social differences and different social groups in Turkey: a pilot study

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Abstract

This descriptive study aims to understand university students' perceptions of social differences and different social groups in Turkey in addition to the sources from which they acquire such perceptions. As a part of a larger project at Akdeniz University (2011.01.0116.002), 37 students were given a questionnaire containing 40 Likert-type questions. The questions interrogated four main domains, namely, which qualities or habits are perceived as social differences, resources from which the participants acquire their perceptions, participants' perceptions of some social groups in Turkey, and participants' perceptions of their families' and social environments' attitudes towards social differences. Descriptive statistical analyses were carried out and the results inform us about the social groups towards which university students hold negative perceptions along with the sources of such negative perceptions. The results also call for the need for intervention of university administrators and curriculum designers to change such negative perceptions.

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1. Introduction

Problems related with social differences and how these differences are perceived by individuals have become an important asset of educational research all around the world. In Turkey's case, as TESEV's (2006) report shows, "othering" continues to be a social problem in Turkey in a way to hinder the development of democracy. As the report shows, all social groups but the Sunnite Moslem population forms the "other" along with various misfits such as homosexuals. Similarly, previous research on social

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differences experienced at schools has shown that students may experience religious, denominational and economic tensions because of their social identities (Arıkan, 2004).

Many aspects of teenage and youth culture have been studied in Turkey although much research is still needed due to the fact that the country has a young population compared to many other European countries. According to Sönmez (2010) teenagers' relationship with brands are affected by TV, newspapers, the Internet, magazines, and cinema along with the family, friends, and parents' level of education. Research on Turkish university students' perceptions of different social groups has shown many different results. As research shows, while Turkish males tend to be more negative towards non-heterosexual individuals in comparison to their female counterparts, they all attach specific stereotypes and stigma to non-heterosexual individuals (Herek, 1988; Sakallı-Uğurlu & Uğurlu, 2004). Research on Turkish youth in 1970s also showed that the father was the decision-maker in their sons' and daughters' future partner in marriage (Gökçe, 1971). Hence, in this study, we tried to find preliminary answers to the following research questions:

1. Which particular individual and social qualities form social differences? (Questions 1-12)
2. From which sources these social differences are learned? (Questions 13-24)
3. What are the attitudes of university students towards particular social groups? (Questions 25-35)
4. What are families' and social environments' attitudes towards social differences as perceived by university students? (Questions 36-40)

2. Methods

Because we were interested in attaining a large group of university students' views of social differences, a quantitative research design was adopted for the purposes of this study. The researchers prepared and applied a scale containing 40 items in a way to find participants' perceptions based on various forms of differences including disability, religious views, ethnicity, sexual identity, clothing, choice in music, physical appearance, social status, geographical background, political ideas, and parents', family's, close social environment's, schools' and media's effect on their perceptions of social differences. Thirty-seven university students studying at Akdeniz University's Faculty of Letters were asked to fill in the scale and the reliability of the scale was found to be ,742 (based on standardized items) suggesting that the scale can be accepted as a reliable tool for use in the context. The data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics. While giving the results, the mean averages are given (an item could weigh five maximum and 1 minimum).

3. Findings

The first twelve questions given in the scale interrogated students' general understanding of the concept of social differences. In these items, how and to what extent individuals differ from one another is asked and the results show that students do not think that every person is different from one another (1,18). As the results show, students believe that the type of music one listens to (3,56), physical appearance such as height, weight, being handicapped, and one's skin color (3,54) and one's sexual identity (3,43) are the leading markers of social differences. In contrast, one's political ideology (2,37), geographical background (2,62), wealth (3,05), and sharing the same culture (3,05) do not seem to be considered as markers of social differences as much as the aforementioned differences are perceived.

The next 12 questions given in the scale focused on the specific sources from which students come to learn about social differences. The results show that family ($f= 3,75$) is the leading source from which they learn about social differences followed by coursebooks ($f= 3,67$) and web sites ($f= 3,59$). In terms of formal education, primary schools ($f= 4,02$) are the sites where students face with different social groups

more than they do in secondary (and high) schools ($f= 3,48$) and universities ($f= 1,62$). Film ($f= 2,83$) and media ($f= 2,59$) receive the lowest scores as sources from which students come to learn about social differences.

The attitudes of university students towards particular social groups are examined with the help of 10 questions asked in the scale. The results show that students do not want to be friends with someone who is extremely large in body size or who is too short ($f= 4,32$), followed by someone with a handicap ($f= 4,13$) and someone from the same religion but from a different denomination ($f= 4,08$). Students also want to have friends with similar taste in music ($f= 4,00$) and they do not want to have homosexuals/ gays as friends ($f= 3,54$).

The last 5 questions aimed to learn about students' perceptions of how their close social environment feels about social differences. The results show that when students consider their family and close social environment, students who think that their family and close social environment share the same religion, values, and culture is rather low ($f=2.18$). These results suggest that the views of these students tend to point at the existence of multiplicity in social differences, there are occasional mismatches between how these social differences are experienced and expressed.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed at attaining a large group of university students' views of social differences through a scale developed for the purposes of this study. As a pilot study, it was only applied to 37 students studying at one department only. The forty items aimed to find participants' perceptions on various forms of differences including disability, religious views, ethnicity, sexual identity, clothing, choice in music, physical appearance, social status, geographical background, political ideas, and parents', family's, close social environment's, schools' and media's effect on their perceptions of social differences. The reliability of the scale was found to be ,742 (based on standardized items) suggesting that the scale can be accepted as a reliable tool for use in the context. Future applications of the scale at this context should shed more light on university students' views of social differences.

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